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Walter C. Metz

*Southern Illinois University Carbondale*, [wmetz@siu.edu](mailto:wmetz@siu.edu)

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## **Pomp(ous) Sirk-umstance: Intertextuality, Adaptation, and *All That Heaven Allows***

**By Walter Metz**

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In “The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation,” Christine Gledhill exposes the problems caused by film scholars attending to melodrama after privileging Douglas Sirk, creator of many 1950s melodramas, as a modernist, Brechtian auteur capable of transforming the lachrymose material presented to him into subversive art. The concentration on Sirk as an auteur did, however, ironically enable the 1970s critical discovery of the melodrama as a genre worthy of scholarly attention. However, the subsequent development of melodrama studies has never completely exorcized these auteurist roots. Film melodrama has primarily been judged politically progressive if it can be explained as using visual distancing interventions by auteurs like Sirk. In her article, Gledhill points to “slippage[s] of the ‘subversion’ argument” between Sirk the auteur and melodrama as a genre (7). This chapter is fueled by the contention that these slippages (and the resultant fetishization of Sirk) continue to plague, limit, and distort investigations of the politics of classical Hollywood cinema.

Specifically, the analyses of Sirk’s 1955 film *All That Heaven Allows* have perpetuated this fetishization. For example, in *All That Hollywood Allows* (1991), a study of these 1950s melodramas, Jackie Byars performs a detailed textual analysis of this film. During the course of the argument, Byars replicates the attribution of artistic genius to Sirk. In discussing the first scene of the film, in which Cary Scott (Jane Wyman), the protagonist, looks at herself in a mirror, Byars argues, “The use of the mirror is an indication of the melodramatic stylization that is to follow, and it functions to intensify Cary’s inward gaze. Desire, in this film, is self-conscious, and this is

made evident by Sirk's use of highly stylized sets and extremes in camerawork" (189). This is precisely the sort of slippage between Sirk the auteur and melodrama the genre that Gledhill is analyzing. Byars wants to attribute the self-consciousness to Sirk while Gledhill points out that melodrama itself is highly self-conscious and often is ambiguously or overtly critical of the social order.

Another symptom of the slippages regarding this film has been the effacement of its fictional source, the eponymous "women's novel" by Edna and Harry Lee. Edna Lee was a fairly prominent author in the early 1950s. This is the only one of her novels on which she collaborated with her son, Harry. Apparently, Harry's function was to give the teenage son in the novel a more "authentic" voice. This work was first serialized in the November and December, 1951, issues of *Woman's Home Companion*, a popular woman's magazine, and then later in 1952 published in novel form. This source novel is itself an extremely interesting melodrama, and engages in much of the same self-consciousness that has been traditionally attributed to Sirk as master director.

Both the novel and the film concern a widow, Cary Scott, who falls in love with her gardener, Ron Kirby. When the small bourgeois community, as well as Cary's two teenage children, take offense to Cary's affair with a younger man from a lower-class position, Cary decides to end the affair. This decision causes Cary a great deal of emotional pain. In both the novel and the film, Cary decides to disregard her community's moral strictures and carry on her relationship with Ron. Thus, this chapter uses the intertextual source material of *All That Heaven Allows* to investigate some of the theoretical consequences of the persistence of auteurism within melodrama studies that ultimately censor, intentionally or not, a political unconscious that relates to 1950s America, not specifically to a progressive director. In this case, the gender issues in conflict in the early 1950s are also the surface text for the continuing subtext of American politics.

## A Brief History of Sirk Criticism

A fairly massive body of Sirk criticism exists within film studies on which Gledhill draws in constructing her argument. In order to critique the problem of attributing the ideology of the film to Sirk rather than the cultural and social history of the 1950s, it is necessary to outline briefly this body of critical responses to Sirk's films. Actually when the films were first released, the contemporary critical establishment (mainstream newspaper and periodical reviewers) generally regarded Sirk's films as overly melodramatic soap operas. *All That Heaven Allows* received a typical level of critical scorn for its melodramatic plot—a widow falls in love with her gardener and struggles against societal ostracism until finally choosing to be at his side. Critic Robert Kass of *Catholic World* called the material and execution, “lachrymose” (306). Bosley Crowther of *The New York Times* likened the film to “One of those doleful situations so dear to the radio daytime serials” (1). In short, the contemporary reviews of Sirk's films chastised them for their low cultural subject matter as well as their melodramatic execution.

However, the auteur and ideological critics of the early 1970s, who published in mass media papers and also in academic journals, found in Sirk one of the great practitioners of Brechtian distancing. These critics argued, because Sirk had staged Brecht plays while in Germany in the 1920s, was able to transform the material presented to him by his studio into highly reflexive, Modernist works, which subtextually challenged the bourgeois Eisenhower climate of which they were a part. The 1970s critics thus conceived of themselves as Sirk's saviors: his work had been denigrated by its original audience and had been ignored until their intervention. A 1971 issue of *Screen* devoted to Sirk stands as the centerpiece of this authorial rescue operation. In one of the *Screen* essays, “Distancing and Douglas Sirk,” Paul Willemen argues, “The subject matter

of these melodramas differs in no way from run-of-the-mill products; in fact, Sirk made quite a lot of re-makes. However, by stylising his treatment of a given narrative, he succeeded in introducing in a quite unique manner, a distance between the film and its narrative pretext” (65).

Willemen continues his argument by delineating two potential spectatorial positions for Sirk’s films: “There appears to be a discrepancy between the audience Sirk is aiming at and the audience which he knows will come to see his films” (65). Because of marketing, genre, and other institutional appeals, “the audience Sirk is aiming at” is conceptualized as an intellectual one versus the one which will actually be drawn to the theater: a female audience. Thus, Willemen’s hierarchization of the intellectual capacities of audience groups thus acquires gender implications. Implicit in his argument is that the contemporary audience (composed largely of women spectators) was duped by the film into identifying closely with the characters and their plights, but not into attending to the film’s socially critical messages. On the other hand, the critically aware audience member, presumably intellectual men (Sirk himself, academic film scholars of the 1970s), would see the critique that the films are offering: in lieu of identifying closely with the characters, they would engage in a distanciational reading position. The gender bias implicit in valorizing Sirkian irony is particularly well studied by Michael Selig in his essay, “A Contradiction a Reading.”

Subsequent work tended to accept uncritically the spectatorial split implicit in the *Screen* readings of Sirk’s films. In his 1981 book, *Hollywood Genres*, Thomas Schatz states, “Although *All That Heaven Allows* appears to us today as an obvious indictment of America’s repressive, sexist, and materialistic middle class, indications are that its contemporary audiences and critics read the film as a straightforward love story” (252). Even though Schatz here is making a different audience split—along historical lines—than that of the *Screen* critics (along gender lines), the

implication remains that one group of spectators is duped by the film and another transcends its surface message to comprehend the film's subtextual, critical operations. Subsequent critics tend to attribute to Sirk the transformation of the "low" mass media source materials into high modernist artistic works. In his 1979 auteurist book *Douglas Sirk*, Michael Stern argues, "The thinness of *All That Heaven Allows*. . . its flabbiness in plot. . . provided the director a measure of freedom to bend the loosely structured material into one of his most directly personal projects" (111).

With increasing feminist attention to melodrama by the late 1970s, new perspectives on Sirk began to emerge. In her seminal 1978 essay, "Notes on Sirk and Melodrama," Laura Mulvey begins to question Sirk's totalizing control over his films' meanings by separating the Sirkian canon into films dominated by female and male protagonists. She argues, "There are two different initial standpoints for melodrama. One is colored by a female protagonist's dominating point of view which acts as a source of identification. The other examines tensions in the family, and between sex and generations" (76). In this analysis, the gender positions within the diegesis of a particular source begin to chip away at Sirk's ability to control the film's critique of patriarchal culture. Mulvey argues, "It is only in dealing with the male unconscious that Sirk approaches complexities nearing the tragic" (77). Although Mulvey does begin to theorize how gender impinges on Sirkian control over meaning, Sirk as controller of the film's meaning ultimately underpins her analyses.

Subsequent feminist criticism begins to attend to the gender assumptions more fundamentally in assessing the status of Sirk's films as totalizing critiques of American culture. In a refreshing narrative analysis which does not dote on Sirk's visual imagery, Brandon French argues that the film is regressive with respect to gender politics, calling Ron "oppression in sheep's clothing." French argues, "While the film liberates its heroine from self-sacrificing motherhood, a

passionless widow, and a stifling suburban community, its protest against the fifties bourgeoisie is ultimately reactionary, betraying a nostalgia for the past, rather than a hunger for a better future” (93). While French’s analysis with respect to gender is a major intervention into Sirk criticism, the reading is quite literal, and does not acknowledge the film’s visual strategies of constructing a class-based critique of 1950s bourgeois culture. Also, oddly enough in a book designed to reveal the contradictions and building strife in gender politics of 1950s America, French does not adequately consider the ideological contradictions (which relate to the film’s source material) built into the film which render its politics ambiguous, as opposed to monolithically conservative.

Both Gledhill and Michael Selig continue a feminist tradition of highlighting the gender politics of the narratives while at the same time acknowledging the Brechtian class critiques implicit in Sirk’s films. Gledhill and Selig argue that the Sirk critics, by attending to the class dimensions of the films’ Marxist critiques, negated the spaces for critiques of gender. In her 1987 discussion of the film, *Imitation of Life*, Gledhill argues:

Sirk’s remake turns the story into a problem of the absent husband and father and obtains his critique of white values at the cost of turning poor, struggling Lana Turner into a “bad mother”—a judgmental temptation few Sirkian commentators have been able to resist, despite the possibility within the logic of the “Sirkian system” for ironically exposing the ideologies of motherhood. Ironic value in this context has an implicitly misogynist edge. (12)

Selig’s 1990 reading of *Magnificent Obsession* continues the track of Gledhill’s argument. He argues, “I hope to show how the film’s critique of social class displaces a potential critique of gender-based social determinations” (1).

This chapter attempts to grapple with the problems in the trajectory of Sirk criticism as identified by Gledhill and Selig by engaging in a cultural history of the *All That Heaven Allows* texts. In her 1989 article, “Much Ado about Excess,” Barbara Klinger has embarked on similar work with respect to Sirk’s film, *Written on the Wind*. In the essay, Klinger attempts to locate

social discourses important to that film's meaning by tracking both the studio's advertising strategy and the contemporary reviews the film received within the mainstream press. Klinger's thesis is that Sirk criticism, in order to "salvage" the films as transgressive, progressive works, has sought to limit the meaning of the film to a single determination, "guaranteed by authorial intent, carried out by formal design, and understood by the savvy spectator" (5). Klinger laments such a critical move because, "The progressive identity is thus preserved by sealing the text off from social negotiations of its meaning, a sphere of activities which may disappoint a progressive reading, but should be significant to ideological analysis" (5). In other words, the meaning of Sirk's film is a discursive struggle—one subject to negotiations and contradictions—and cannot be reduced to one manifestation, ultimately verifiable by the presence of the author.

Related to Klinger's method of studying studio promotion materials and contemporary reviews is the present study of the source material of *All That Heaven Allows*. By attending to the film as an adaptation and to the discursive field set up by that novel's address in a woman's magazine, another set of determinations of the historical meaning of Sirk's films can be activated.

### **A Cultural Analysis of Edna Lee's *All That Heaven Allows***

Despite her popularity at the time, not much has been written about Edna Lee. Born in the Deep South in 1890, Lee wrote often about the smothering customs of the South and the oppressive effects this social climate had on women. In 1947, she published her first novel, *The Web of Days*, which, as of 1975, was the 67th best-seller of all time for hardback fiction, selling over 1,000,000 copies (Hackett and Burke, 28). In 1950, she published *Queen Bee*, her first novel to be adapted for the screen. The film, made in 1955, starred Joan Crawford as a Southern belle manipulating the inhabitants of a plantation mansion. Both of Lee's early novels appear to have been published



only in book form. Lee's next two (and apparently final) novels, *All That Heaven Allows* (1952) and *The Southerners* (1953), were both serialized in *Woman's Home Companion* before being published in book form by Putnam.

Aimed mainly at women (and particularly mothers), *Woman's Home Companion* was founded in the 1860s. The magazine had a tradition of giving voice to and being controlled by women. According to magazine historian Theodore Peterson, *Woman's Home Companion* was for most of its history the editorial product of Gertrude Battles Lane—a woman who joined the staff in 1903 earning \$18 a week. By 1941, she was earning \$52,000 a year and was vice-president and director of the company (Peterson, 140). Battles Lane's primary editorial strategy centered on the attempt to keep the magazine in touch with its women readers. In 1935, she established "The Companion Poll," a monthly feature in which a group of 2,000 readers were polled about a variety of subjects affecting their lives. Battles Lane was also dedicated to publishing fiction that appealed to her women readers, including novels by Willa Cather and Edna Ferber (Wood, 126).

However, Battles Lane died in 1941, and the magazine's last fifteen years involved a series of male editors tampering with the magazine's focus in an effort, according to new publisher W.A. Birnie, "to be a better women's magazine" (Qtd. in Peterson, 141). Roger Dakin, the articles' editor, explained the philosophy in a characteristically condescending and sexist way. Dakin called it the "chocolate cake approach," and believed that when someone, "show[s] someone a chocolate cake, you don't have to argue him into wanting a piece. In dealing with problems that affect all communities, show vividly how one community solved it, how the women in that community benefited by the solution" (Qtd. in Peterson, 142).

This new editorial stance toward the rhetorical address to women in the early 1950s suggests a way of reading the end of Lee's novel. Cary has forsaken Ron and stayed at home in

compliance with the wishes of her children and her friends. After Cary almost dies in a gas leak accident, she makes the decision to go to Ron. The novel ends with Cary taking action, whereas the Sirk film ends with Cary's passivity, as she hovers over the wounded Ron, caring for him out of a motherly instinct. The novel here seems to adopt Dakin's "chocolate cake" discourse—Cary was treated poorly by social conventions, but she acted to overcome the obstacles and take Ron, her "chocolate cake" reward.

Whether due to this new editorial strategy or not (other demographic reasons for the magazine's post-war success could be suggested), *Woman's Home Companion* prospered during the early 1950s, the period during which *All That Heaven Allows* was published. Circulation climbed from 3.7 million in 1946 to 4.3 million in 1953, and advertising revenues in the same period rose from \$9 million to \$12 million (Peterson, 142).

In addition to its fiscal success, *Woman's Home Companion* was also able to prosper in publishing fiction. From 1953 through 1955, the following were among the names appearing as writers of articles: Thomas Costain, Daphne du Maurier, and Lloyd C. Douglas, the latter the best-selling author of *Magnificent Obsession*, another Sirkian melodrama of the 1950s. (Wood, 124). Magazine historian James Playsted Wood firmly places this fiction in the melodramatic mode: "much of the fiction. . . has made a specious sentimental appeal, provided an illusory never-never land of incredible slickness and glamour, inhabited only by impossibly beautiful girls and incredibly handsome men" (126). However, there is no reason why we must accept Wood's disdain for melodrama: distancing ourselves from his denouncement allows the interrogation of the productive contradictions in Lee's melodrama to which his aesthetic superiority does not allow him to attend.

In *Woman's Home Companion*, the fiction itself is interspersed with non-fiction articles about women's concerns, discussions about the movies, and advertising. These surroundings serve to contextualize the novel, rendering an address to the reader different from the address a novel published in book form would make to its reader. Wood assesses the importance of the juxtaposition of advertising and the other material in the magazine when he argues: "[E]ditorial and advertising pages naturally complement each other. Love is the subject of a romantic short story; the accessories of love are for sale in the advertising pages. A glamorous heroine walks the stage of a short story, and her counterpart--dressed in trademark girdles, shoes, brassiere, stockings, dress, suit, coat, and cosmetics--parades through the advertising" (127).

The usefulness of Wood's observation can be demonstrated by examining three discursive fields—psychiatry, food, and Christmas—dealt with in non-fiction articles in the November and December issues. The focus is on these issues in particular because they resonate with narrative developments in the novel. Discourses of psychiatry figure prominently in both non-fiction *Woman's Home Companion* articles and *All That Heaven Allows*. The November issue begins with a special feature entitled, "How Grown Up Are You?," which assesses for a woman what sorts of questions about her personal life a psychiatrist would ask if "she" went to "him" for a consultation. In *All That Heaven Allows*, psychiatry and Freudian discourses are highlighted through Cary's daughter Kay, who analyzes her family throughout the development of the novel. When her brother Ned objects to a sexy red dress Cary has chosen for a night out with Harvey, Kay analyzes via Freud her own reaction to Cary: "Subconsciously I'm probably resenting you like mad all the time. Girls do resent their mothers. Especially if they're attractive and competitive, sexually speaking" (57).

Food is obsessively treated in both non-fiction articles and *All That Heaven Allows*. A series of articles in the November issue entitled, “Here’s How to Eat Well,” cover the topics of: “Stretch Your Food Dollar,” “Save on the Meat Bill,” “Thanksgiving Day,” “Give a Lift to Your Leftovers,” and “Dressing Up Thrifty Desserts.” Throughout the novel, food serves as a signifier of melodramatic excess. The eating of food at times stands in for the lovers’ passion. When they are together, eating occurs often, yet when they are apart, no one is hungry or inclined to eat. The strategy is typical of melodrama: sex is what cannot be spoken, and passion is thus siphoned off into another activity, in this case, eating. During their first lunch together, the narrator informs us, “There was nothing finicky or overly delicate in [Ron’s] handling of food. It merely vanished in large quantities. It was, of course, exactly the way she felt a man should eat” (14). However, when Cary’s other suitor, the undesirable Harvey comes over for dinner, the description of his eating expresses his symbolic impotence: “Having dinner with Kay and Cary, Harvey made himself equally agreeable to both, but Cary observed that he ate sparingly. The fact was, he admitted when she expressed concern, that he had to be pretty careful of his diet” (104). When Cary returns to Ron’s barn after being away from him, the narrative accentuates the effects of her separation through the image of food: “She had not been conscious of being hungry but, and it surprised her, she ate ravenously” (124). The morning after they first make love, “she ate like a starving woman” (134). And, during their final separation, when Cary thinks that she’ll never be with Ron again, “the sight and smell of food revolted her” (239). Food is obsessively returned to as the signifier of desire, and the absence of appetite as a symptom of the incomplete repression of desire. The use of food in the novel might be seen to subvert the editor’s “chocolate cake” metaphor; he meant that the magazine should position women to engage in bettering her bourgeois community, while

the novel appears to use food as a signifier for Cary seeking out and fulfilling her own pleasure (even when such pleasure disrupts and affronts the bourgeois community)

A consideration of the format of *Woman's Home Companion* proves particularly fruitful to our examination of the way the magazine's address and the narrative of *All That Heaven Allows* converge. The format is such that each page is divided into four columns. Generally, the fiction takes up no more than two columns. The rest of the space is devoted to advertising or other features. This leads to the novel being spread throughout the entire issue. In reading the novel, one is not only forced to read the advertisements on each page, but to flip through the rest of the magazine in search of the next page on which part of the novel is printed. This makes for a remarkably fragmented address to the reader. Consider that in the November issue, May Richstone's poem, "Food For Thought," is printed in the middle of two columns of *All That Heaven Allows* text. The poem reads, "Oh to be a clairvoyant wife / Not for the deep dark thoughts in his life / But as I plan dinner, oh for a hunch / On what the dear man had for lunch!" (96). This poem remarkably plays out a number of narrative developments in the chapter printed on the page. Here, Cary is visiting the barn which Ron has secretly converted into a home for the two of them. Ron's friend Mick tells his wife, "I'll admit you can roast duck. It's as good a reason as any for my having married you, I suppose" (WHC, 96). This passage of the novel re-inforces the poem's theme, which is that women should be most fulfilled when satisfying their husbands with well prepared food. The poem also suggests that food might not be the only dish on the husband's lunch menu, as is suggested by the line, "Athe deep dark thoughts in his life." Here, the wife is not only responsible for providing a satisfying menu, but also for keeping the husband from sampling tempting nibbles elsewhere. The poem, thus, also has a bit of an edge, some bite of its own.

Yet, once Ron and Cary are alone, the novel's use of food imagery inverts. Ron shows Cary the kitchen he has renovated in the barn. Then Ron feeds Cary a stew he has cooked specially for her. This action spurs the "she ate ravenously" (WHC, 96) passage already cited. Again, the novel here is using food as a metaphor to speak what cannot be spoken: Cary's sexual desire for Ron, although who prepares for whom the meal is inverted from normative gender roles. The complexity of discourses found on just one page of the magazine's address works to problematize any easy assertions of the novel as politically reactionary in terms of social or gender issues.

A third discourse revolves around Christmas in the fiction and non-fiction of the December 1951, issue. The first article of the issue, the reader's "Companion Poll" entitled, "Dreams For Christmas," asked readers whether they would want a million dollars for Christmas. 97% of the readers "stressed peace of mind, spiritual contentment, a happy marriage and liking one's work as more satisfying than the luxury and worldly acclaim a million dollars might bring" (WHC, 11). This sentiment virtually condenses the narrative development of *All That Heaven Allows*. In this issue of the magazine, in fact, a full-page drawing illustrates the scene in the novel where Cary sits alone by her Christmas Tree on Christmas Eve and whispers, "Merry Christmas, Ron" to no one there. This sentiment that happiness and togetherness is more important than class position and age (which are the reasons why Cary cannot be with Ron) is mimicked in the companion poll results.

Advertisements in *Woman's Home Companion* also figure prominently in the way its readers are addressed. As a particularly stunning example, the November issue features two full-page layouts of Jane Wyman. Early in the magazine, Wyman advertises Lux soap: "Be Lux Lovely." The ad features a full-page medium shot of Wyman with her arms folded, looking out at the reader. Deeper into the magazine, a full-page layout for the film, *The Blue Veil* shows Jane

holding a baby, with the caption, “Who is the real Mother of this Child?” These two ads, via the image of Jane Wyman, play out the central conflict of *All That Heaven Allows*: the beauty of femininity versus the noble sacrifice of motherhood. In the novel, Cary must choose between realizing the potential of her beauty as a woman by marrying Ron, or sacrificing this happiness for her role as a mother.

It is not necessary to claim that this advertising strategy had a direct effect on the casting of Sirk’s film to claim that Jane Wyman (through a convergence of her appearances in other movies, in ads, and in public appearances) suggests for the readers of this magazine an image of Cary. But this type of intertextuality works to refute Sirk as the ultimate source of the meaning of his films since the meaning of Jane Wyman as Cary precedes her appearance in the film. Also, this coincidence problematizes the notion that the film, because it again starred Jane Wyman, was a sequel to *Magnificent Obsession*. Wyman’s images in the magazine already situate her as figures representing both contradictory positions confronting Cary. Wyman’s eventual role as Cary in the film can be seen as a result of a wide range of discourses, not just her success in *Magnificent Obsession*.

### **An Intertextual Reading of Douglas Sirk’s *All That Heaven Allows***

The following reading of the Sirk film as an adaptation contends that scenes which have been praised as representative of Sirk’s masterful subversion of ideologically complicit 1950s Eisenhower culture have direct precedents in the source material. The auteur and ideological critics, by defining Sirkian irony as the critical motor, have ignored the possibilities of cultural contradictions already circulating in American culture as at least as significant and salient as causes as is any “genius” attributable to a single contributor to the film. The point here is not to denigrate

visual analysis: Sirk is clearly a master of the visual aspect of the film medium. Instead, a contextual and ideological reading of the film is offered, which attends to the film's intertextual source material in addition to its visual components. With the exception of work such as that done by a Klinger on *Written on the Wind*, such challenges to visual analysis in the Sirk literature have been lacking. Three examples of the relationship between the novel and the film will be pursued. The first involves the melodramatic aspects of each, the second involves the different uses of canonical references, and the third involves asserting that the novel's text offers precedents for the visual material reportedly invented by Sirk for the film. In each of these cases, the main assertion is that the novel is already circulating the contradictions of 1950s American culture, and questions the attribution of social critique solely to Sirk's film.

The first example involves the ways both the novel and the film have been understood as melodramas. From the 1970s, Sirk's films have been understood to be ideologically subversive. It was the Screen project to demonstrate this using visual analysis. Then, scholars argued that 1950s melodramas as a whole—those by Sirk as well as by other directors such as Vincente Minnelli and Nicholas Ray—were subversive. In *Hollywood Genres*, Schatz argues, "1950s melodramas are actually among the most socially self-conscious and covertly 'anti-American' films ever produced by the Hollywood studios" (224). In "The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation," Gledhill further widens the scope of melodrama's subversivity and argues that melodrama itself is at least an ambiguously subversive genre. However, in so doing, Gledhill alters what subversivity might entail. No longer does it include just a top-down rejection of dominant ideology, but becomes something much more complicated. Gledhill argues, "Melodrama is not about revolutionary change, but about struggles within the status quo" (Gledhill 1986, 45). This formulation of the



political history of melodrama rejects the notion that Sirk's films take an already politically reactionary form, the melodrama, and inject political subversivity into it.

The melodramatics of Edna Lee's novel attest to Gledhill's understanding of the politics of melodrama, and reveal that contests over identity politics are already occurring in this narrative, even before Sirk's Brechtian deconstruction of it. At first glance, it seems clear that the novel treats Cary's problems from within the position of bourgeois patriarchy. For example, the novel replicates the conservative appeal of *Woman's Home Companion* by validating social institutions such as marriage, in fact treating them as unassailable. At one point, the narrator reveals, "It was obvious that [Cary] was a woman who could achieve complete realization of her capacities only in marriage" (245). The novel constantly endorses conservative, bourgeois experience: "Cary wasn't the type of woman who wished to rebel against the world and its standards. She had instead accepted and conformed to them. She had wished to earn approval as a good wife, a conscientious, responsible mother. Like a great number of women she knew, her whole aim was to preserve and improve her world, not to oppose or change it" (166).

And yet, the novel is by no means purely conservative. The novel is at its best when it is striking at the hypocrisy of a community which chastises Cary for pursuing her "illicit" affair with Ron and yet at the same time supports patriarchal codes of behavior. In a party scene early in the novel, a beyond middle-aged man flirts with a twenty-year-old girl. The double standard escapes the grasp of the party-goers, but not Cary or the narrator: "It occurred to no one, Cary was aware, that it was in the least unsuitable for a man nearly twice Jo-Ann's age to be attracted by the obvious allures of her person" (38). At times, the novel approaches a stunning level of insight for a work which precedes Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* by more than ten years. The narrator informs us, "In matters of vital importance, love and marriage and sex, the arbitrarily different

standards applied to the two sexes remained, basically unchanged. The celebrated revolution that had taken place had turned out to be no more than superficial renovation” (41). In the same way that Eisenhower America’s solutions of gender inequality turn out to be superficial, so too does the community’s offered solution to Cary’s personal problem. When Cary decides to cave in to the community’s social strictures and give up her affair with Ron, she begins to develop migraine headaches. The novel very self-consciously understands that the ideological positioning which Cary undergoes causes her to suffer.

The Sirk film as a modernist text is therefore not the only venue in the 1950s for the voicing of deep cultural contradictions. Gledhill argues that melodrama cannot, “step outside bourgeois patriarchy because [it] works from the inside out. Its starting point is the lived experience of the material and ideological realities of a social formation” (45). Clearly Edna Lee’s novel operates in this mode. The novel is at once conservative and endorsing of accepted family values, and yet at the same time expresses deep resentment and discontent about the positioning of its female protagonist. It is classically contradictory.

Gledhill critiques a Marxist tradition in melodrama criticism (including Raymond Williams, Charles Eckert, and Chuck Kleinhans) which attacks melodrama’s politics because of the genre’s “mystifying resolution of ‘real’ social conflicts” (13). Gledhill’s critique centers around the argument that a Marxist formulation “suggests that the ‘real’ lies in a set of socio-economic relations outside the domestic and personal sphere” (13). This theoretical argument has much to do with understanding the differences between Sirk’s film and Lee’s novel. A Marxist critique in the Brechtian tradition focuses on the novel’s concerns with Cary’s experience through a critique of class. In such an analysis, the film points to the repressive bourgeois social order as the cause of Cary’s troubles. The community’s problem with Ron turns out not so much to be the age

difference (further complicated by the proximity of Rock Hudson and Jane Wyman in age), but class difference. Ron is a gardener while Cary is a firmly established middle-class widow. Thus, Sirk's film wonderfully critiques this aspect of American cultural values by revealing the artificiality of class conventions (for example, through the use of glossy, enameled colors and by encouraging distanciation by shooting the characters through stairway railings and window panes). However, at the film's end, Ron has an accident, causing Cary to come to his side and nurture him back to health. In this way, as Gledhill underscores, with respect to gender, the film is not nearly so progressive. Cary is relegated to a maternal role in which she passively waits for Ron to recover.

In the novel, however, Ron has no such accident. Instead, Cary nearly dies in a gas accident in her basement. She comes to the realization that she needs to pursue her own happiness, and decides to go live with Ron, defying the community's prohibitions against this action. With respect to gender politics, the novel actually activates a plot trajectory that at least opens up the contradictions of gender positioning within 1950s American culture, which the film's attention to class does not allow. Sirk's film, like the Marxist critics, treat class as the only real historical conflict, whereas the novel works through the realities of gender experience, activating the contradictions of lived experience that Gledhill sees as the constitutive features of melodrama. Thus, from a feminist point of view, the novel may be said to be politically subversive while the film retreats from such a stance.

The second example of how the novel and film circulate the same contradictions but in different discursive fields involves the notion of textual canonicity. In Jon Halliday's book-length interview, *Sirk on Sirk*, Sirk maintains that for each film he made, he chose to include a secondary source text as part of the diegesis in order to provide a critical intertext for the main narrative. For instance, in his 1958 film, *The Tarnished Angels*, that intertext is Willa Cather's *My Antonia*

(1918), which serves to counterpoint Laverne Shumann's (Dorothy Malone) ultimate decision to leave Burke Devlin (Rock Hudson) and return to the nation's heartland to raise her son. In *All That Heaven Allows*, Sirk claims that he chose Thoreau's Walden in order to accentuate the nature versus culture theme of the main narrative. Halliday's exchange with Sirk on this point is worth quoting at length:

Sirk: "I don't remember *All That Heaven Allows* very well in detail, but I do recall the following influences on me. . . . One of the first of all American literary impacts on my thinking, when I was thirteen or fourteen, was a book my father gave me: *Walden* by Thoreau. This is ultimately what the film was about--but no one recognized it. . . ."

Halliday: "But you even stuck the book into a close-up at the party..."

Sirk: "Yes, I had to; the producer suggested cutting it out, not quite knowing what it meant. But it stayed in. . . . With a picture like that your only saving point is to take a tree out of the garden and put it down in a salon." (99)

Sirk attempts to frame the *Walden* issue around his fight with the studio to keep his intertextual reference prominent in the film. This serves to replicate standard auteurist criteria for a director's personal vision subverting the crass standardization perpetuated by movie moguls. In addition, in a culture versus nature melodramatic move of his own, Sirk perpetuates a high art versus melodrama bias by labeling his film the "salon," and the Lee novel the "garden."

According to James Harvey (who also conducted an interview with Sirk in 1978), Halliday allowed Sirk to go over the proofs of the interview and make editorial changes before the book was printed (52). This explains, for example, how Sirk was able to make lengthy citations from canonical literature (*Alcestis*, *Hamlet*, "The Waste Land") during the course of the interview. Such a condition of the book's publication allowed Sirk to firmly establish himself as a self-aware, Modernist artist whose everyday discourse was permeated with allusions to the great works of world literature. Although I am informed that it is standard practice to let an interviewee go over the proofs of the interview, it is interesting that Sirk so self-consciously chose to insert such pretentious high art references into the interview in order to distance himself even further (pretending to not remember the film at all, and then remembering an obscure reference to *Walden* in one scene, is already highly suspicious) from the melodramas he had directed.

Lee's novel never mentions *Walden*. However, what is of interest here is the way Lee's novel is not using direct intertexts, but drawing on important contradictions of and arguments within 1950s American culture. The *Walden* controversy of the mid 1950s offers an example of an important battle on the cultural front. In 1954, the year after the novel is published and a year before the film is released, *Walden* certainly had a particular resonance with the culture. The United States Information Service banned the book from libraries because it was "downright socialistic" (Qtd. in French, 97). 1950s American culture, usually understood as celebrating

conformism, was engaged in a debate over Thoreau's non-conformist themes. These debates do not only flourish within political mechanisms like censorship, but within "low" cultural realms like the woman's novel.

For example, Lee's novel re-creates the arguments of Thoreau's "different drummer" passage as a way of explaining the hero Ron's anti-bourgeois behavior (choosing to live in the woods and raise trees instead of living in the suburbs and being a traditional businessman). Like Thoreau's persona in *Walden*, both Ron and his friend Mick have rejected their former lives in New York City advertising firms to pursue a communion with nature as tree farmers. Ron in fact extends his devotion to nature by rejecting money made by selling Christmas trees, a practice he claims is an overly crass and commercialized abuse of trees.

Lee also includes in the novel a passage in which Mick quotes a poem in order to explain Ron's love of nature: "Then talk not of inconstancy / False hearts, and broken vows / If I by miracle can be / This live-long minute true to thee / 'Tis all that Heaven allows" (115). The structure and function of the quotation links it with the rhetorical strategy of *Walden*. Thoreau often uses literary quotations and his own poems to clarify his message. Consider the following two passages as they relate to the passage from *All That Heaven Allows*: "The false society of men-- / --for earthly greatness / All heavenly comforts rarefies to air" (31); and: "Men say they know many things / But lo! they have taken wings / The arts and sciences / And a thousand appliances / The wind that blows / Is all that any body knows" (39). Thus the novel *All That Heaven Allows* establishes intertextual resonances with Thoreau's ideas in developing the character of Ron. Ron is linked thematically with a trope of the American character, one who has rejected consumerism to live in the woods. One such major figure in 1950s American culture is Thoreau. Thus, Lee's novel does

not engage in direct citations of high, canonical literature, but does develop resonances with the discourses of non-conformism in *Walden*.

This loose play with intertextual references pervades Lee's novel. At the novel's climax, when Cary is trapped in a closet in her basement, she begins having hallucinations. The narrator tells us, "A figure in scarlet robe and the most fantastic mask of all held a copper trowel in a brown hand. In the last second before the final stone slid into place, she saw the hand with the trowel. The massive hammers pounded again, wedging the stones together. She was sealed in the tomb behind the wall and the cries of the people outside came to her distant and muffled" (301).

The hallucination clearly evokes any number of Edgar Allen Poe stories. In particular, "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Cask of Amontillado" both involve the protagonist going to great lengths to obtain an object of desire only to be walled in at the end of the narrative. Yet, Lee's novel never specifically cites Poe or his works. Instead, the narrative uses such indirect intertexts to create a particular mood. Activating the specific intertexts is not as important to the narrative as the creation of these moods.

The sub-textual presence of such high literary resonances in Lee's novel serves to problematize and fragment the notion of Sirk's control over his film's intertextual meanings. The inattention to the possibility that Lee's novel might have contributed anything of an intertextual cultural value whatsoever to Sirk's film reveals the elitist assumptions behind the Brechtian readings of 1950s melodrama. The willingness of 1970s film scholars to unproblematically accept Sirk's view of his transformation of low culture into high art through canonical references further attests to the subjectivity of such reading formations. Yet Edna Lee's novel—which itself would be considered to address a mass audience—engages in developing Thoreau's or Poe's ideas without ever snobbishly appealing to the status of the literary canon in order to validate her literary

project. The result of this is not to reveal Edna Lee as yet another neglected Modernist, concerned with intertextual referencing of the American literary canon. Instead, a serious critical attention to Lee's novel reveals that contradictory discourses exist in many post-war cultural artifacts. As attending to novels like *All That Heaven Allows* demonstrates, such "low" 1950s "women's fiction" needed no aesthetic savior in Douglas Sirk: the complexities commonly attributed to "the Modernist sensibility" were textually contested in forms critically excluded from the high art category. In the middle of Sirk's film, one of Ron's friends tells Cary that Ron never read *Walden*. "He just lives it", she concludes. In a similar way, Lee never quotes *Walden* (as Sirk does), she just lets her characters live out its values. These values of non-conformity were certainly not those of the dominant ideology and thus contradicted it. The novel, thus, serves as counter-discourse to McCarthyism, Americanism, and national security, as it uses gender to negate the standard line of the political apparatus.

The third and final example of the novel's inclusion of material which has been attributed to Sirk's genius involves the film's most commented upon scene, where the camera tracks into the television screen, revealing Cary's look of despair at her position in the family home, isolated and alone. Molly Haskell, one of the film's most strident admirers, describes the scene thus: "[Her children] giv[e] her the television she never wanted and leav[e] her, in a sublime, ironic Sirkian image, to look at her own reflection in the screen, to see in the image of her loneliness her pointless sacrifice projected into the infinity of old age" (274). Fred Camper, one of the *Screen* critics, declares that in Sirk's films, "some scenes can be so crucial as to exert a determining effect on the meaning of the surrounding scenes" (53). For Camper, this scene in *All That Heaven Allows* is the television scene: "The film, taken as a whole, can almost be said to pivot around this single shot.



The expressive force of every image, the meaning of every surface, is to some extent informed by its presence and implications” (54).

This shot is visually stunning, and can be read as critical of Cary’s entrapment within the family home. However, to see this as pure Sirkian transcendence of “weepie” material is misguided—the contradictions of Cary’s position are already explicit in the source as evidenced in the passage cited above. Moreover, the novel obsessively returns to Cary’s loathing of television specifically, and all media, in general. The narrator, describing Cary’s loneliness, states: “Ned had recommended that she purchase a television set because it would occupy her. The very fact that she had come to the place where a television set was required to provide an illusion of companionship made her resist the suggestion” (59). After being forced to abandon Ron, Cary tries to find things to do to occupy her time. One day, while downtown shopping, Cary stops in front of a store window and looks at television sets. The novel’s narrator again explicitly connects television with Cary’s defeat: “She still felt that to yield would be, somehow, an admission of failure, an admission of the barrenness that was her life” (238).

This passage, while it does not have the startling visual effect of the image of Cary’s face in the television screen, does express Cary’s positioning within patriarchal culture. This observation raises the importance of considerations of the style of, as opposed to the content of, a critique. Sirk critics have engaged in a fetishization of style which has caused them to highly value the stylistic as a means of social criticism. The television serves as a trope of Cary’s oppression, and it is this trope from the novel that Sirk transforms when developing his stylized, visual critique.

However, as the novel progresses, the use of the television becomes even more radical than its function in the Sirk film. Cary, forcing herself to accept her barren life without Ron, becomes more and more of a recluse. She begins liking the television shows she watches, because by

watching them, she does not have to go out of doors to see people. At the novel's climax, Cary's television set goes on the blink: "She got only a chaos of zigzagging lights and shadows, she was upset" (292). Cary, as the day goes on, becomes more hysteric about her broken set. She calls a repairman, who tells her she must wait a week for service. Cary's impatience increases: "I must have it repaired immediately. I'll pay extra" (292). Finally, Cary snaps, and becomes desperate: "She turned on the television set, and on the chance that its failure lay not in itself, but, as often happened, in transmission tried it again. But the screen offered her the same racing shapes of dark and light, a furious zigzag of madness and chaos. . . . She said aloud in irritation, 'Damn!' And then vehemently, 'Damn, damn, damn!'" (293).

Immediately after this scene, Cary smells her house filling with gas, goes down into her cellar, and gets locked in a storage closet. After her friend rescues her from sure death, Cary immediately runs to Ron. The novel ends with their joyous embrace. The novel points to Cary's hysteria over the television's malfunction as the final trauma which forces her to overcome her sexual repression and go to Ron without regard to bourgeois standards of social propriety.

## **Conclusion**

Through these scenes in *All That Heaven Allows*, it is clear how a study of adaptation might affect the traditional view of Sirk as a Modernist creator of social critique. As the use of the television scene in the novel shows, Sirk's "genius" is a qualified one. He serves to translate contemporary social and cultural critiques and contradictions into visuals. However, claims of his ability to produce unified critiques of ideology out of his modernist vision should be greatly qualified.

The television scenes in the novel problematize the tendency of traditional readings of Sirk to posit an intelligent (male) critical audience against the contemporary (female) audience "duped"

by the trite conventions of “women’s” narratives. As Lynn Spigel argues in “Installing the Television Set,” “Even if television offered a grand illusion of the outside world with its panoramic vistas and travelogue plots, it seems likely that women were critical of this illusionism, that they recognized the discrepancy between the everyday experience of domestic isolation perpetuated by television, and the imaginary experiences of social integration which television programming constructed” (21).

Spigel suggests that women of the 1950s, as much as any later, more “technologically aware” group, were conscious of the illusionism of television. The self-conscious way that both Edna Lee in writing *All That Heaven Allows*, and Cary in living her fictional life, react to television as a signifier of women’s containment, suggests that Spigel’s thesis is a viable one. The notion against which Spigel is reacting—that women, when presented with television, were merely duped by its illusionism—is mimicked by how Sirk criticism has vilified contemporary audiences’ reactions to women’s fiction and films.

In addition, this chapter has forwarded two interventions into adaptation studies and the critical response to Sirk by attending specifically to the multiple activations of the *All That Heaven Allows* narrative. It is vital to understand the creation of texts in their cultural specificity. A cultural historical approach which attempts to locate the discourses important to the texts within the institutional circumstances of their production has proven useful in achieving this understanding of *All That Heaven Allows*. Klinger has done work in examining the production of reception contexts via review and publicity discourse in her article about *Written on the Wind*, “Much Ado About Excess.” This chapter has attempted similar work with respect to adaptation by attending to the way a magazine’s Eisenhower-era address presented a novel to its readers. Discursive elements of the magazine’s address and of the novel itself, when they finally show up in the film text, can

thus no longer be treated as mere formal filmic elements, placed there by Sirk. Instead, such an approach allows the film text to be read as part of one particular discursive field of 1950s American culture, the enforcement or transgression of rigid gender roles.

This chapter has also attempted to demonstrate the importance of examining the archaeology of film studies criticism in order to understand the way filmic texts have been, and continue to be, interpreted. By joining the work of revisionist Sirk scholars such as Klinger and Gledhill, the chapter has argued that previous Sirk criticism has propagated ideological reading positions which have been thought purged from film studies, namely the privileging of High Modernism and its textual practices at the expense of the “lowly” form of “women’s” expression, the melodrama. The fact that no one has ever attended to the source of *All That Heaven Allows* as a potential location for the melodramatic mode functioning as a critique of cultural norms demonstrates that, in the case of Sirkian studies in particular (and melodrama studies in general because of the importance imputed to Sirk), the cultural biases embedded in film studies treatments of authorship and genre have not been completely overcome.